

Code Eleven by darthstormer

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Summary: The risk was always there, that El's powers might get put to the test and expose her secret to the world, or worse, to what remained of the lab. For a few years, it remained a fear held in the back of her mind, but seldom spoken of. What happens when El winds up in the wrong place at the wrong time and she faces the choice to act or remain hidden? One-Shot.

Code Eleven

Summer 1987

When El first made her way into the real world, she and her father used to talk at great length about the dangers she might face. There were the typical fears that all parents have for their children, though typically at a younger age. Then there were the more difficult dangers, stemming from her unique abilities and her unconventional upbringing. One of their biggest shared fears was the idea that someone would find out about the things she could do and either try to exploit her, shun her or somehow lead the remnants of the lab to reclaim her. In the beginning, they had been cautious and taken every new experience one step at a time, always watching for danger. Thankfully, those dangers never surfaced. The people of Hawkins readily accepted the cover story about the Chief of Police taking in the daughter he never knew about and after the scandalous whispers moved on to the next bit of juicy gossip, life settled into a quiet routine. Eventually the dangers were pushed to the back of their minds, still there but not dwelt upon. El was careful about when and where she made use of her powers and who she let know about her past.

It was a warm Tuesday at the tail end of June when all those fears were violently pulled back into the foreground and threatened to expose her secrets. El was on cloud-nine as she worked on preparing a picnic lunch, stowing sandwiches and snacks away in her backpack. Miraculously, work schedules had lined up just right, and she and Mike both had the same day off, while her father and all their friends still had to work. That left an entire day for just the two of them and they planed to take full advantage of it. As much as she loved hanging out with their friends and being out among people in town, she still much preferred the solitude of a hike in the woods around the lake behind her house.

Mike arrived shortly after Hopper left for the station and the two set out. It only took a few minutes to pass around the far side of the lake and head off toward a large clearing they had found last fall, just

before the snows moved in. Though the ground there was still blanketed in grasses and wildflowers, there was enough rock just below the surface to keep trees from taking root. It made the perfect secluded spot where they could lay out a blanket, share a lunch, and kick back to enjoy having absolutely nothing they really had to do for the day.

As they approached the clearing, they chatted about plans for the Fourth of July celebrations coming up the next week. The Chief had to work that night, doing his best to keep the teens of Hawkins from burning the town to the ground with mishandled fireworks. El would be spending the afternoon with Mike and his family for a barbecue, and then the whole Party was headed out to the quarry to stake out a good spot for fireworks. From the road along the upper rim, you could just see across the top of the trees. Any of the fireworks shot off around Hawkins would be visible from there and they couldn't wait for the spectacular show.

"Do you hear that," Mike asked, slowing his pace and craning his neck to one side.

"Sounds like a plane," El said after a pause, turning her ear skyward toward the noise.

A plane passing overhead wasn't unusual as Hawkins sat below one of the major flight paths out of Indianapolis. Mike was an aviation nut, and El never tired of listening to Mike explain his interests, so they had spent many afternoons laying out on the lawn watching the planes pass overhead. What was concerning about this plane, was that it sounded much lower than the jets that normally passed over town. The engines also had a low, ominous growl to them.

"Come on, the clearings just up ahead," Mike urged as they broke into a jog. "We can see it better from there."

Stepping out of the trees and into the knee-high grass, they turned their eyes skyward, looking for the source of the noise.

"There," El said, pointing toward a spot above the trees on the far side of the gap.

Mike stopped cold, realizing what it was they were hearing. It was a passenger jet - 150 seats, at least - speeding toward the ground at a dangerous angle. One engine was trailing a line of dark smoke, while the other was still engulfed in flames. It was hard to judge from their vantage point, but he guessed they were already below 5000 feet and coming down fast. Whatever had happened to the engines appeared to have sent debris into the control surfaces and the aircraft looked to be on a doomed path toward the woods, not far from them. He could only imagine, with sickening horror, the panicked pilots pulling desperately at unresponsive controls, knowing they only had seconds to recover before it would be too late.

El recognized the desperate situation the plane was in, and instinctively knew what she had to do. She knew there were people on the plane, lots of people. Families off on vacation. Parents with their children. She also knew what would happen when the plane hit the ground; no one would walk away from that.

These were the kinds of dangers she and Hopper had tried to discuss, but eventually gave up on, knowing there was no right answer. Doing something would mean exposing herself and taking on whatever risks that entailed. Doing nothing would mean innocent people losing their lives. It wasn't one of those things where he could tell her what to do, or not do, or even what he would do in the same situation. The only advice he could give, was that when the time came, she would know the right thing to do and that he would support her, whatever she chose.

The backpack hit the ground with a thud as El slipped the straps off her shoulders. She widened her stance and dug her toes into the soft soil as she squared up against the path of the doomed plane.

"El?" Mike began, terrified for what she was about to take on.

They had attempted a similar conversation and ultimately come to the same conclusion. As Mike saw it, telling her to not use her powers was just as bad as telling her she had to. The decision was hers alone, and he supported whatever she did.

El glanced at Mike and he saw the determination already set in her eyes. He gave a quick nod, and she turned her attention back to the

rapidly falling aircraft. Raising both hands, she stretched out with her mind and tried to take hold of metal speeding toward the trees. She could feel the cold aluminum catch in her grasp and she began to push back against it. She wasn't sure whether she could hold it, as it was far bigger than either the van she had flipped, or the train car she had dragged. Still, she pressed onward, knowing the cost if she failed.

Suddenly, she began to get a hot feeling in one hand, and somehow knew the fire still engulfing one engine was getting dangerously close to the fuel tank. If that happened, it would be too late to make any difference. With a flick of her hand, she tore the engine free of the wing and flung it off to one side. Eventually, it would land miles away in the quarry, putting on its own fireworks display, but El's attention was still on the fuselage held in her grasp. She could feel it slowing, but not nearly enough. There was no way she could keep it in the air, but if she could slow it enough, the people inside would have a chance.

Digging her feet more firmly into the dirt, El leaned forward and threw more force at the plane. With agonizing slowness, she felt it beginning to come under her control. She tried to picture the terrified passengers on board, grasping at the image for whatever strength it could give her, unsure if she actually had enough. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her back, strong fingers resting gently but firm between her shoulder-blades. In their touch, she could almost hear Mike's thoughts. "I'm here. If you don't have enough strength, take what you need from me."

A low growl rose in her throat as she pushed out with everything she had, and perhaps a little of what Mike offered as well. The plane was only a couple hundred feet above the ground and quickly approaching the clearing as she felt the whole bulk slow, the metal around the nose beginning to buckle under her grasp. Feeling her strength running out, the growl grew to a primal scream in her throat as she leveled the aircraft out and slowed it nearly to a stop as the wings began to brush the treetops. A deep red began to close in at the edges of her vision as she began to lower the frame through the trees. With less than 20 feet to go, the last of her energy gave out and she lost her grip.

As the red around her vision gave way to black, El fell to her knees as the plane dropped the remaining distance to the ground. Blood poured from her nose and trailed from her ears, while deep purple lines traced the veins in her face. Mike was there to catch her and ease her gently to the ground, settling her gently in the grass as he felt for her pulse and assured himself she wasn't in immediate danger. Glancing across the clearing, he could see where the plane had come to rest just beyond the tree-line. Already, the emergency exits were being opened and passengers were making their way down the escape slides, shaken and bruised but very much alive. El had done her part spectacularly, and now Mike has his own job to do.

Chief Hopper had set out more than a few conditions before he allowed Mike Wheeler to date his daughter. Among those had been meeting with him at the station to discuss how they would handle situations like today that they knew would inevitably come. The Chief had laid out his guidelines and Mike had agreed without hesitation; he meant every word when he said he would do anything to keep her safe.

After pulling the straps of the backpack over his shoulders, Mike knelt and carefully scooped El's unconscious body into his arms and took off into the woods. Whatever happened with the people on the plane was up to them now; Mike's only job was to make sure El was nowhere around when emergency crews showed up. Settling into a jog, trying to cradle El as gently as possible, he made his way back toward her house. Years of running from bullies had trained him well for crossing the uneven terrain at top speed, and before the last of the passengers had made their way off the plane, he was pounding his way up her porch steps.

Dropping to one knee next to the front door, Mike laid El down gently and began to dig through the backpack for her house key. After finding nothing in the two outer pouches of the bag, he suddenly remembered watching her tuck it away in the pocket of her shorts as they headed out.

"Sorry, El," he apologized to the unconscious girl as he carefully slipped a hand into her pocket and fished out the key.

After getting the door open, Mike picked her back up and carried her

inside, giving the bag a kick through the door as he went. Settling her down on the couch, he grabbed two blankets and quickly bundled her up into a cozy cocoon, doing what he could to stave off the chill that was already running through her. As he swept a lock of hair away from her face, her eyes flickered open and met his, the hint of a smile tugging at her lips before exhaustion pulled her back under.

Memories came flooding back to Mike of the night she closed the gate in the lab. She had been in much the same state when Hopper had brought her back to the Byers' house and it had taken almost a full day before she could stay awake for more than a few minutes at a stretch. Still, he had to remind himself, she had made a full recovery and been just fine, and she would this time as well.

Assured she was stable and comfortable for the moment, Mike made his way over to the phone in the kitchen to make a call he had been dreading for years. Once the story had come out about having a daughter, Hopper had paid to have a second, private line installed in his office that bypassed the station's front desk; for family emergencies he had jokingly brushed off. Now Mike just had to pray the Chief was still in his office as he dialed the number.

"Not a good time," Hopper barked into the phone, by way of a greeting. It was clear he was busy getting ready to head out as he spoke, and Mike could take a decent guess at the emergency pulling him away from his desk.

"It's Mike," he began slowly. "We have a code eleven."

"Shit," Hopper muttered after a pause, as he dropped back into his chair. "The plane?"

"Yeah," Mike confirmed.

"Is she alright?"

"She's exhausted and can't keep her eyes open, but yeah, she's alright."

Hopper breathed a heavy sigh of relief as Mike went on.

"I got her out of there, just like you said. We were gone before

anyone had a chance to spot her and I brought her right back to the house."

"Okay. We knew this was bound to happen at some point. I still have to do my part and go out to the scene; treat this like any other disaster. You remember the rest of the plan?"

"Yeah, I remember. I'll get us loaded up right now and we'll head out."

"Alright then. I'll meet you two there when I can. Until then, take good care of her." Hopper ended, with an exhausted resignation in his voice. "And Wheeler? Thanks."

Setting the phone back on the hook, Mike took a quick look back at El and confirmed she was still fast asleep but breathing steadily. He wanted to clean up the blood from her face, but time was of the essence and he had to get them out of the house. He knew enough about plane crashes to know this one was going to immediately raise some impossible questions. Planes don't fall straight through the trees on their way down; one like this should have left a trail of debris and snapped trees at least a quarter mile long before it came to rest. If anyone from the lab was still around, a crash like this in Hawkins would clue them in immediately that their experiment Eleven was still in the area and the people she had interacted with during her escape would be the obvious places to start their search.

Pulling open the backpack, Mike took out the folded picnic blanket and set it aside. Throwing open the pantry, he grabbed the emergency box from the top shelf and upended the contents into the bag. He knew he was crushing the sandwiches lower down, but there wasn't time to be careful. He was about to zip the bag shut, when he thought better and stepped over to check the freezer. Sure enough, he spotted a familiar yellow box and pulled it out, setting it on top of everything already in the bag and zipped it shut.

Crossing the living room, Mike paused by the front door and grabbed two sets of keys off the hooks. The first - a single house key - he dropped into his pocket as he walked out the front door and over to El's blue Ford Tempo. Sliding behind the wheel, he dropped the backpack on the passenger seat before pulling around as close to the

front door as he could get. The day was already getting warm, but Mike still cranked the heat up as high as it would go, before heading back inside to collect the girl sleeping on the couch. They had found, over the years, that she wound up freezing cold and unable to get warm again when she pushed her powers too far. This was easily the hardest she had gone since that night at the lab, and Mike knew her recovery was going to need some help.

Carrying a drowsy El back out of the house, Mike pulled the front door shut behind them. It took some careful maneuvering to get her into the backseat and buckled securely, but he managed to get her settled. Less than 10 minutes after arriving at the house, Mike pulled out of the driveway in a spray of gravel and headed across town. Even though it added minutes he didn't want to waste, Mike took the long way around, avoiding downtown and prying eyes that might recognize her car.

Turning off the highway, Mike pulled down a long-disused gravel road and was dismayed to find a fallen tree blocking his path, knowing he would have to make his way in on foot. The Chief obviously hadn't checked on the place in a while, and Mike could only hope this one tree was the worst he would find. After shrugging into the backpack, he carefully worked El out of the back seat and into his arms. At one point, she tried to protest and insisted she could walk from here, but she was asleep again before he could even respond. He couldn't help but smile at how stubborn and self-reliant she could be, even at a time like this.

Making his way around the tree and down the remainder of the gravel road, he soon spotted the old cabin tucked away among the trees. He kept a wary eye out as they made their approach, but everything was silent and still. Only the crunch of fallen branches underfoot could be heard as Mike entered the clearing around the house, noting that one of the tripwires was down, a heavy branch laying across the line. He could remember the first time Hopper had brought him out here to visit El. He had insisted Mike be blindfolded the whole drive from downtown and on the walk from the Blazer until they reached the front door, guiding him with a firm hand to the shoulder and telling him when to step take a high-step over the wire. The drive made sense, to keep the location a secret, but Mike

was pretty sure doing the walk blind was just a power-play on the Chief's part to remind him who was in charge.

Fishing the key out of his pocket, Mike undid the single lock on the cabin door and let them inside. Hooking a foot into the sheet spread over the couch, Mike gave a kick and pulled the cover free, before laying El down and tucking the bundle of blankets securely around her again. Turning his attention to the cabin, he set about getting the rest of the space livable again. He started with the breaker box, throwing the heavy shutoff handle up and holding his breath, hoping the power-line leading to the cabin hadn't been taken out during the winter storms, too. With a sigh of relief, he watched as the bulb above the kitchen table flickered on and he heard the comforting whir of the refrigerator starting up.

Bringing an armload of wood in from the pile outside, Mike got a fire going in the old stove in the corner of the living room, driving the damp chill out of the room. After uncovering the bed in El's old room and putting on a fresh set of sheets, he moved the sleeping girl to the more comfortable spot and tucked her in to rest. Grabbing a handful of the prepared shells by the front door, Mike made a quick circle around the cabin, checking the trip-lines and resetting those that had been sprung with a fresh round, ready to alert them to any unexpected visitors approaching.

Back inside, he secured the four locks on the inside of the front door and fell exhausted onto the couch. It had felt like a day of frantic activity, but he glanced at his watch and realized barely an hour had passed since they had stepped into the clearing and spotted the doomed plane. While he never ceased being completely awestruck at her abilities, what she had done this morning was beyond anything he ever could have imagined. Beyond his amazement, he found himself incredibly proud of her. Whatever happened now, whatever the uncertain future meant for her, every one of those passengers was alive entirely because of her.

It would be nearly twelve hours before Hopper finally arrived at the cabin, exhausted from a day spent handling the crisis. In the meantime, Mike did what he could to tend to El's recovery. After warming some water over the fire, not wanting to wait for the ancient water-heater, he grabbed a washcloth and cleaned away the

blood caked to her face. Tucking her hair back, he laid a gentle hand to her forehead and was relieved to feel the clammy chill was already leaving. Despite the danger he felt hanging in the air, he couldn't help but notice how angelic she looked as she slept; small, powerful and exceedingly beautiful.

Over the years, El had kept up training on her own terms, and occasionally overdid it. Through trial and error she had found a few favorite things that helped perk her back up, and they always kept those on hand just in case. Mike dug these emergency supplies out the backpack and arranged them carefully on the beside table. Cans of Pepsi and a bag of beef jerky were hardly medicine, many would argue they barely counted as food, but they were the things she wanted whenever she was drained so Mike kept them at the ready. During waking moments, he would coax her to take a few sips and chew a small piece of the meat before she closed her eyes and fell under again. Mostly, he sat in the chair by her bedside, held her hand, and watched her sleep.

The sun was gone by the time Hopper pulled his Blazer to a stop next to El's car, cursing the fact that he hadn't taken the time to check on the cabin at all that spring. His mood soured further when he realized his flashlight was dead, so he would be forced to make the trek in the dark. After getting passed the fallen tree, the road itself was easy enough to travel. After that, he found the rest of the walk he could do by instinct, having made it countless times during their year in hiding.

Leaning heavy on the door frame, he gave the familiar knock and waited to be let in. His heart dropped a little when he heard footsteps approaching, rather than the familiar click of El undoing the locks from wherever she happened to be sitting. Once Mike finally undid the latches, Hopper stepped in and was startled to find his old rifle slung over Mike's shoulder. If the lab decided to show up in force, the old .22 wouldn't make any kind of difference, but he appreciated the boy's effort all the same.

"How is she," he asked as he surveyed the room, amazed at how livable Mike had managed to make the place.

"Still sleeping, but she's doing okay."

Dropping the paper sack he was carrying onto the kitchen table, Hopper walked into the bedroom and dropped into the chair by her bed. He trusted Mike's assessment, but still needed to see for himself before he could release the fears that had been building in his mind the entire day. Just as he had said, the Chief found El sleeping peacefully, nestled under a stack of blankets. If anything, she looked just the same as when she would fall asleep while he read to her.

"She stayed awake for almost 15 minutes last time, even sat up for a few of those," Mike offered, trying to reassure the worried father.

Hopper gave a nod, his eyes never leaving his little girl. With every passing hour out at the crash site, his dread had grown over just how exposed they were. For someone who knew what to look for, there was no denying what had happened this morning.

"Come on," Hopper said with a nod toward the kitchen, "let her rest."

Mike followed him out of the room and picked up on the scent coming from the bag on the table.

"Help yourself. I didn't figure there was anything still edible out here."

Mike sat down at the small kitchen table and pulled a burger from the sack, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was. While he dug in, Hopper wandered over to the fridge, knowing he had left something behind when they shut the place down. Sitting on the bottom shelf, cold and waiting, was a six-pack of beer; his own emergency supplies. Twisting a can free from the plastic rings, he hesitated, then pulled a second can free. Dropping into the chair opposite Mike, Hopper popped the top on his first beer and slid the can across the table. Mike gave him a questioning look, trying to decide if it was some sort of test.

"Take it, you've earned it," he said, easing Mike's hesitation, as he popped open the top on his own can and took a long swallow.

"So, I've seen how things look out at the site. What actually happened out there?" Hopper finally asked.

Mike recounted the incident, starting from noticing the sound a plane way too low. How they stepped into the clearing and spotted the plane diving quickly to the ground with both engines destroyed, and how El jumped into action without a moment's hesitation. Her choice to risk detection, putting the lives of strangers over own, didn't come as a surprise to either of them.

Now it was Mike's turn to ask one of the questions he had been dreading all afternoon. "How suspicious does the whole thing look?"

"It's not good," Hopper said gravely. "The first few hours were hectic, making sure everyone was accounted for, getting the wounded treated and putting out one small fire set off by the remaining engine. Later, once the scene was secured, people started looking around and realizing nothing added up. Callahan was the first to ask why there wasn't a path of destruction leading up to where the plane came to rest. If he noticed something wrong, you know everyone else is going to ask the same thing."

He paused, pulling a burger from the sack and taking a bite.

"Did I stop it?" a soft voice asked, causing both of them to suddenly look up.

El stood in her doorway, leaning against the frame, a blanket draped loosely over her shoulders. Mike and Hopper stood and started toward her, though Mike held himself back by a step, knowing the Chief needed a minute to reassure himself she really was alright.

"You gave us a pretty big scare," Hopper said, wrapping her in his arms.

As he stepped back, Mike took his place, wrapping her in a tight embrace. "Yeah, you stopped it. You were amazing."

"Come on, let's sit down," Hopper said, leading the way over to the couch.

The trio sat, Hopper on one end and Mike at the other. El sat curled up next to Mike, leaning as much on him as the back of the couch.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked, still doubting whether she had made a

difference.

"Yeah kid," the Chief confirmed with a smile. "147 people on board and every single one of them is alive thanks to you. Only a couple dozen even needed to be checked out at the hospital, cuts and scrapes mostly, and I think most of those injuries happened before you even took over. I don't know what's going to happen now, but you did the right thing. I'm really proud of you."

"Me too." Mike agreed, putting an arm around her and giving a gentle squeeze.

Hopper continued, getting serious again. "For tonight, I've got a few of my guys plus a handful from County keeping the scene secure. First thing in the morning, the Federal guys show up to take over. FAA will deal with the scene itself, FBI will be working around town trying to find anyone who saw anything, taking statements, things like that."

"So we're settling in here at the cabin for the time being, right?" Mike asked hopefully. He had been running through the possibilities in his head all afternoon as he sat by El's bedside, and was preparing himself for bad news.

"I'm not sure she'll be safe anywhere around Hawkins if anyone from the lab shows up and starts poking around. The way I see it, she needs to be out of town first thing in the morning."

Mike felt his arm tighten around her just a little, afraid she was going to slip away from his life all over again.

"If you leave with her, how long do you think you'd have to stay gone before it was safe?" Mike asked, desperate for a glimmer of hope.

"I'll be honest, kid. If I leave with her, I'm not sure we could ever come back to Hawkins."

Mike felt his heart start to hammer in his chest, desperate for any outcome where he didn't lose her.

"If the Chief of Police goes missing without a trace, the day after a plane crash with all kinds of unusual circumstances, it looks way too

suspicious. Even if we came back, there'd be a ton of questions I couldn't answer. I'd be out of a job and there's no other jurisdiction that would take me on with a mark like that on my record."

Hopper paused, wrestling with his better judgment before he continued.

"On the other hand, if the Chief's daughter took advantage of her father's distraction and ran off for the summer with her boyfriend, that comes off seeming pretty normal. By the time the town gossips were done, the rumors would sound more unbelievable than the truth."

Mike puzzled at what Hopper was suggesting, before turning to look at El. She stared back with equal bewilderment, knowing her father couldn't mean what it sounded like and assuming she must still be more exhausted than she realized. Eventually, all they could do was look back at Hopper, more confused than ever.

"Look, I don't like it. If there was another way, I'd jump at it, but I've been going over it all day and I can't see a way around this. El needs to be out of town before the Feds get here tomorrow. And she doesn't deserve to lose the life she's built on account of a selfless act that saved hundreds of lives. So, right now I'm beat and just want to get to bed. El, you're still recovering so its off to bed with you, too. Mike, you can take the couch tonight. At first light, you two are getting in the car, and your getting the Hell out of here for a while. We'll talk about the details in the morning."

Mike watched Hopper for some sign he was misunderstanding. He couldn't believe the Chief was actually trusting him to take El on the run until things settled down. He wanted to ask more, but El was quickly starting to fade again, exhaustion pulling her to sleep as she sat by his side.

"Get her back to bed," Hopper quietly ordered. "I'll grab you one of the spare blankets."

Mike scooped the limp girl in his arms and carried her back to bed, tucking her in carefully. He wished her goodnight with a kiss to her cheek, but she was already fast asleep. Returning to the couch, the

found a pillow and blanket waiting for him, while Hopper worked to fix up his old cot by the fire.

"Are you serious about this?" Mike asked.

"In the morning," he answered gruffly, falling onto the cot and pulling a blanket over his tired frame. Finally, sensing the question still hanging in the air, he added, "But yes."

Mike felt he had barely shut his eyes when he felt Hopper giving his shoulder a shove.

"What time is it?" Mike asked, running a hand over his face and shaking away the fog from his mind.

"Time to get up," Hopper answered, smiling in appreciation at his own joke. "Help me push the couch out of the way."

Mike wasn't sure what this was about, but he was too tired to question it as he grabbed an end of the couch and gave a shove. After it was safely off to one side, Hopper pulled open the trap door and peered down into the darkness before leaning down and coming up with an unmarked cardboard box.

"I'll start some coffee," Hopper said, dropping the box on the table as he passed. "I'm sure she'd rather have you wake her up, than me."

Mike smiled at the offer, anxious to check on El. He sat on the edge of the bed and tucked a strand of hair delicately behind her ear. She looked so peaceful he hated to disturb her, but he could tell by Hoppers insistence that he wanted them up and gone as soon as possible.

"Good morning," he whispered, leaning close to her ear.

El's eyes flickered open, a look of confusion giving way to a joy as she spotted Mike.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, glad to see her more responsive.

"A little better." she answered with a smile. "Tired, but better."

"Table. Now, you two." Hopper called from the kitchen. "You'll have time to yourselves soon enough."

Walking out of the bedroom hand-in-hand, Mike was surprised to find a steaming travel-mug of coffee already waiting at the table. Hopper stood in the kitchen, sipping his own mug and feeding a line of Eggos through the toaster, stacking them on a square of foil as they came out. Mike held a chair for El to sit, and then slipped into the other chair.

"Alright, here's the deal, and I don't have time to go over this twice. I'm due back out at the site in a less than an hour and you two need to be on the road before then. You're taking El's car and you need to stay gone until it's safe to come back. No phone calls, no letters, no contact that might give away where you are."

He paused, reading the questions forming on their face. He had spent most of the night thinking over the answers and plowed onward.

"I'll explain the situation to your friends, and to Mike's parents; I think we can trust them to keep things quiet. I think your summer jobs are a different story, but that can't be helped at this point. You need to get somewhere far from here and lay low; cheap motels usually aren't too picky about checking IDs closely and will leave you alone if you don't cause problems."

"Where should we go?" El asked, knowing little about what lay beyond either Chicago or Indianapolis.

Hopper shook his head gently. "I can't tell you that. I can't know where you guys wind up. It's safer that way."

As they spoke, Mike slowly reached back and pulled out his wallet. He knew roughly what was in there, but he checked just the same.

"There's a problem with the plan," Mike began slowly. "I've got \$34 on me. I've got another \$50 in my sock drawer at home if we swing by my house. We're not going to get very far on that."

A conspiratorial look came to Hopper's face as he walked over to the table and pulled up the flaps on the box. Mike and El leaned in close

as he lifted a small black duffel bag out of the box and dropped it on the table.

"Open it," he grinned.

Mike reached out and nervously tugged the zipper across the top of the bag. Looking inside, he practically fell out of his chair.

"We always knew this was going to happen at some point, so I've been stashing away what I can. That should hold you for quiet a while."

Mike put a hand in the bag and pulled out two bundles of cash, \$100 bills in one and \$20s in the other. The bag was full of them and looked to be mostly \$20s and \$10s, but he could see another \$100 stack as well.

"How much is this?" Mike asked, having never seen this much cash in his life.

"A little short of \$9000 at last count. You should count it tonight and keep close track of what you spend. We don't know how long you'll be gone so use it slow and make it last."

"So, if we can't call, how do we know when it's safe to come back."

Hopper turned his eyes to El and she nodded in understanding. "Give it a couple weeks, focus on getting rested up. After that, check in on your old man every now and then. I'll let you know when its safe."

The toaster popped behind Hopper with a clank, signaling the last of the Eggos were done. He wrapped the foil around the completed stack and handed them to El.

"Alright, time to go." he announced.

Mike grabbed the duffel, zipping it shut and threw the strap over his shoulder before grabbing his coffee and standing to help El to her feet. She was a little shaky, but with Mike and Hopper's help, she made the walk out to the car herself. Standing beside the idling car, Hopper wrapped his girl in a tight hug. Every instinct was telling him to get in the car and go, leaving Mike behind, but in his heart he

knew this was the only way.

"You take care of yourself, and stay safe. I love you."

"I love you too, Dad," she whispered back, still unsure about leaving without him.

As she got herself settled in the passenger seat, Hopper walked around the car and turned his attention to Mike. He laid a firm hand on the boy's shoulder and met his eyes with a look that spoke volumes.

"Take good care of her. I'm counting on you," his eyes said, before adding "if you lay a hand on her, I will end you."

Mike got the message loud and clear, and nodded, his eyes answering, "I won't let anything happen to her. I promise."

A few minutes later, Mike and El were putting Hawkins quickly behind them. They started out North, before turning to the East a few hours outside town. Those first days El spent mostly asleep, still recovering from the crash. Mike found them cheap motels that accepted an extra \$5 at check-in to not bother checking his ID. When she was well enough, they found a store to grab a few changes of clothes and a road-atlas to figure out where they wanted to go. With no particular destination in mind, they sat side-by-side on a motel bed outside Pittsburgh, Mike flipping through the pages of maps as El blindly stabbed a finger down on a page.

That's how, as the Fourth of July arrived, Mike and El found themselves on a blanket in the sand on a beach in South Carolina. In lieu of a family barbecue, they shared a couple gas-station hot dogs and a big bag of potato chips. The sun was quickly fading from the sky, and fireworks soon took its place as El snuggled deeper against Mike's side.

"We could just stay gone," she offered, admiring the bright colors reflecting off the surf.

"We could," he laughed, pulling her tight, his lips meeting hers.

They had made the suggestion several times already, and it was

becoming a running joke for the pair. As appealing as the idea was, starting over someplace, just the two of them, they both knew they would return to Hawkins when things had calmed down.

"Is the Pacific Ocean as beautiful," she asked, laying her head against his chest and wondering if anything could top the pristine blue she had watched all afternoon.

"I don't know," Mike admitted. "I've never been there. Want to find out?"

She nodded, not lifting her head from where it rested. The next morning, they pointed the car to the West, eventually hitting the Pacific along the Oregon coast. She decided it was, indeed, just as beautiful. Even better was watching an ocean sunset, the brilliant orange disk slowly slipping below the horizon. After that, they went back to flipping through the atlas and picking destinations at random. They never stayed in one place for too long, anxious to see as much as they could while they had the chance, and equally anxious to go home.

While Mike and El crisscrossed the country, Hopper kept the situation under control back home. After cluing in the Party and enduring Dustin's inevitable jokes about Mike living out a teenage boy's dream, they set to work spreading the rumor that the pair had secretly been planning their escape since March. Explaining the situation to Mike's parents was more difficult, but they came around pretty quick as well; it helped they had been clued in about El's full story the year before.

Once that was done, all he could do was wait and watch and worry. He kept himself as deeply involved in the crash investigation as he could. He called in a few favors, including with Dr. Owens, to see if there were any hints of attention from whatever remained of the old lab. There were plenty of questions, but none anyone had a good explanation for. As far as he could tell, no one on the plane saw anybody out in the woods until the first-responders started arriving on the scene.

Every few days, El would check on him, usually late in the evening after dinner. He couldn't explain it, but he would feel a familiar tickle

in the back of his mind letting him know she was there.

"Not yet," he'd say with a shake of his head.

The feeling would linger for a few seconds longer, and then she'd be gone again. It hurt every time he had to tell her to stay away, but it reassured him to know she was out there and doing alright.

Eventually, with only a week left before school was to start, he decided they were in the clear.

"Come home," he said with a smile when she checked in that night. He could practically feel the ecstatic relief washing over her through their connection.

In the end, coming home was far easier than anyone could have predicted. At school, Mike and El became something of folk-legends, having pulled off a getaway other couples could only dream of. Many were surprised that that El didn't turn up pregnant, that they didn't come back married, and that Hopper hadn't murdered Mike on the spot. Soon enough, though, the rumor-mill found new interests to latch on to, and Mike and El's great summer disappearance quickly faded into Hawkins High history.

The plane had long since been inspected and analyzed, chopped up and hauled away. The interviews were done, and reports were being generated. Though the data pulled from the flight recorders had some inconsistencies, the flight crew was credited with a near-miraculous recovery. After a mid-air collision with a flock of geese, both engines were critically damaged and the elevator controls jammed, throwing the plane into a deadly dive. At the last minute, it appeared the pilot managed to free the controls again and pulled the nose up enough to burn off most of the planes velocity, putting it into a complete stall just above the treetops. From there, the plane made the survivable drop down through the trees. There were some who questioned the findings, but they couldn't provide a better explanation as to how the events unfolded. With no fatalities or even serious injury, everyone involved was eager to close out the case and move on.

As impossible as it had felt that first day, things actually went back to normal. School was in full swing and life had fallen back into routine.

It was mid-October when El came home to find a letter waiting on the kitchen table.

"What's this?" she asked her dad, busy at the stove fixing dinner.

"Don't know, it was just in today's mail."

El studied the envelope and something just felt off about it. It was addressed to her, Jane Hopper, but the return address was blank. Tearing open the flap, she fished out the single, handwritten page. She read it once, heart leaping into her throat and dropped into her chair before reading it again, sure she must have been mistaken.

My Dearest Eleven,

First, I must tell you how proud of you I am. As soon as the details of the crash began to emerge, I just knew my little girl had a hand in saving all those innocent lives. While you forced my hand by running off as you did, I can see your time out in the world has been productively spent and you have not only kept up your training, but taken your abilities far further than I would have thought possible on your own.

I took an enormous risk, not bringing you back to the lab as soon as we located you; your police Chief wasn't as careful as he thought, stashing you away in that dreary cabin for more than a year. Instead, I decided perhaps the best course of action for your training would be for you to remain outside the lab and experience the world, the good and the bad. We both know you had become resistant to your training in the months leading up to your escape and new motivations were necessary for continued success.

It is clear to me, now, that you found those new forces to push you forward to remarkable levels. I will admit, the world has taught you a lesson I never seemed to be able in the lab: selfless compassion. True, you showed mercy by refusing to kill the cat, in defiance of my instructions, but the cost of such an action was small. You were no stranger to the dark-room by that point, and though you did not enjoy your time in there, it held little sway over your decisions. Out in the world, however, among your new friends, you faced down the creature without hesitation, knowing the act could be fatal. Still, you stood in defense of people you knew, who you had come to care for. This most recent demonstration,

though, you risked exposing your deepest secrets to the world to save hundreds of strangers from certain death. You didn't know them and they will never know you, or what you did for them, but you acted all the same, instantly judging them innocent and deserving of a second chance at their lives.

It is no secret I lied to you throughout your childhood, but only when necessary to guide and shape your training, to help you reach your full potential. That said, I was always truthful with you about your purpose in the world and the ways you alone could make things better. I told you there were bad people in the world; I'm sure you've come to recognize a few of them. There are probably times you include me on that list. Beyond those obvious threats, there are the less personal threats to the world. A plane in trouble after a chance encounter with a flock of birds? Last year, when the Soviets lost control of the situation in Chernobyl; could someone with your unique abilities have been able to contain the disaster? I know you are only one exceptionally unique girl, and not every life can be saved, but you have a role to play in this world.

I want to make it clear: I am not coming for you. You don't have to go into hiding. You don't have to alter one aspect of your life. If my goal were to take you back into custody, I would have done so already and avoided the formality of a note. I could have taken you back as you sat alone in the cabin watching your soap operas, or countless times as your biked home from school. I could have plucked you off the beach in South Carolina as you gazed in wonderment at fireworks out over the ocean.

No, I am resigned to the fact that I could never take you by direct force. Instead, I would like to propose a truce of sorts. Live your life, train as you see fit, and come to know the world for what it is. But know there may come a day when I call upon you to help. Innocent lives will once again be at stake, and you may well be the only one who can save them. When that time comes, I hope you can remember this truce and the life I have allowed you to live. I hope that you can put aside whatever hatred you still foster in your heart against me and understand that what I did, I did and continue to do, for the greater good.

Until then, be happy and live well.

Always,

Papa

Seeing the color drain from El's face as she set the note carefully on the table, Hopper snatched it up and began to read. She watched as his face contorted through anger and guilt. She could see him momentarily contemplate dragging a few of their belongings out to the car and just taking off, leaving Hawkins behind forever. And she saw the resignation cross his face as he realized they would never get away, and that it might force Brenner's hand to rescind his offer.

While the arrival of the letter had been startling, she found some part of her had always known Brenner was still out there. Whether she had been in denial or just scared to look, she had never gone looking for him in the Void. As to what he had written, she found herself at odds with herself. She hated the man who had called himself her Papa, and everything he stood for. She also felt in her gut that his offer was genuine and he was going to remain in the shadows and allow her to live her own life.

Someday, though, he would show up at her door with a job only she could do. When he came, she would be ready. She couldn't say for sure if she would accept his task or not, but she trusted that when the time came, she would know what to do.